



U.S. Army (Adam Mancini)

AFGHANISTAN

The Path to Victory

By JOSEPH J. COLLINS

The focal point of the war on terror has shifted from Baghdad to Kabul, from Mesopotamia to the Hindu Kush. It is in U.S. national interest to pursue a balanced counterinsurgency and state-building policy in Afghanistan. This policy—neither cheap nor quick—should be focused on the defeat of hardcore Taliban and its associated movements, which include al Qaeda, and the simultaneous creation of a capable and effective state in Afghanistan. There are no quick-fix or silver-bullet solutions to the problem. To accomplish this policy, we will have to pick up

the pace and creativity of our efforts. We—the United States and its coalition partners—must do this with all deliberate speed and in close coordination with our efforts to support Pakistan.

The urgency of strategic reform stems from one key fact of life: we are in serious (but not grave) trouble in Afghanistan. Violence is up, and despite a doubling of U.S. forces and the recreation of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP), security incidents have increased more than tenfold since 2004. Last year, a provincial capital was attacked, and rumors of Taliban

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shadow governments in many provinces abound. President Hamid Karzai's approval rating has slipped—by the most favorable estimates to around 50 percent. Inefficiency and corruption are rampant. Urged on by reports of collateral damage and civilian casualties, Afghans who rate U.S. performance as “good” or better have slipped to only a third of the population.¹ Only their barbarity, poor performance, and limited repertoire have kept the Taliban from greater successes. While they have steadfastly believed that time is on their side, they still can only win if the coalition quits.

It is no wonder that the Obama administration and U.S. Central Command have conducted strategic reassessments. Many people, however, are still asking how this conflict will end, and others wonder whether it is worth the effort. In the eighth year of this conflict, other experts remember that General George Marshall warned during World War II that “a democracy cannot fight a Seven Years War.”² Another group points to our massive national debt and wonders whether we can afford to throw good money after bad.

Pundits and professors have searched diligently for silver-bullet solutions. Some suggest that we should just focus on what is important for us, counterterrorism, and not worry about state-building. In the world of academic theory, this might be possible—but in reality, counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, reconstruction, stabilization, and state-building in Afghanistan are all strands in the same rope. In the end, if we do not help to create a stable, decent Afghan state, our counterterrorism efforts will be required there perpetually. Why should Afghanistan—30 years at war and one of the five poorest nations on Earth—accept the risks and costs of being our ally in this war and expect nothing in return? If we cannot offer the Afghans a better life, what is the difference between us and the Taliban?

Other experts suggest that, since Afghanistan has never had a functioning central government, we should stop trying to build one and work all of our priorities through local and tribal officials, bypassing the sclerotic government in Kabul. Henry Kissinger has even noted that “attempts to establish centralized Afghan control have rarely succeeded and then not for long.”³ This pessimistic conclusion clouds Afghan history. For generations, there was a central government in Kabul that, along with provincial,

local, and tribal entities, created law and order and did the business of the country. Marin Strmecki, a longstanding expert in regional affairs, told the Senate Armed Services Committee:

*until the late 1970s, Afghanistan [was] a relatively stable developing country for most of the twentieth century. It was a poor country, to be sure, but one with a state that carried out basic governmental functions and that enabled gradual political and economic progress.*⁴

In a similar vein, some believe that we should work more closely with border tribes, forming militia or auxiliary units akin to the Sons of Iraq who figured prominently in the surge in that country. Indeed, there are some safe ways of using tribal formations, but without tight control and central direction, we could end up encouraging warlordism or violent local rivalries. In any of these schemes, balancing central government and local prerogatives should be an important priority for Afghan government officials.

Reconciliation may well be another false hope. While encouraging the defection of Taliban members is fine (and ongoing), the notion that the Taliban could form a political party within Afghanistan's democratic

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framework is as far-fetched as thinking that there could be an autonomous “Talibanistan” inside the current Afghan state. Not only is the Taliban leadership not eager to negotiate while they are doing well, but there are also other obstacles to reconciliation:

When the Taliban ruled, it conducted numerous crimes against humanity for which there has never been an accounting. In addition to the extreme repression of its citizenry—no kites, no music, no female education, executions at soccer matches, etc.—thousands of non-Pashtun Afghans were killed for sport by the Taliban. Anyone wanting to reconcile with the Taliban will also have to figure out how

*to deal with the guys who have been planting [improvised explosive devices], kidnapping civilians . . . destroying reconstruction projects in the countryside . . . burning girls' schools, and cutting off the heads of non-combatants. . . . While [President] Karzai may see some of the Taliban as wayward brothers, his non-Pashtun allies do not.*⁵

There are no viable alternatives to a full-bodied counterinsurgency and state-building approach in Afghanistan. There is no substitute for defeating the Taliban as a military threat and subsequently preparing the Afghan state to deal independently with its own security and economic problems. To take a halfway measure or to quit now on the Afghans would ultimately invite the re-Talibanization of Afghanistan and the reestablishment of the al Qaeda sanctuary. As warm a base area for terrorism as Pakistan has become, it does not compare in any dimension to the freedom and facilities present in pre-9/11 Afghanistan. As Secretary of Defense Robert Gates reminded us: “To fail—or to be seen to fail—in either Iraq or Afghanistan would be a disastrous blow to U.S. credibility, both among friends and allies, and among potential adversaries.”⁶ While the concept of victory in irregular wars is often ambiguous and unsatisfying, General Douglas MacArthur's statement is valid in this case. In Afghanistan, “there is no substitute for victory.”

What Went Wrong?

To find the path to victory, one must first review how this “good war” went bad. Since 2004, the Taliban has clearly done more to regain its lost status than the coalition has done to advance its objectives. Among the key strengths possessed by the Taliban are a few thousand dedicated cadres, excellent funding from the drug trade and Persian Gulf charities, and the luxury of an unimpeded sanctuary in a neighboring country. Hampering the combat endeavor are the half-hearted efforts of most North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) nations and the complex decision mechanisms associated with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

NATO, meant to be a solution, has become a *big part* of the security problem. The standing of the Alliance in Afghanistan could not be lower. Ponderous, flat-footed, and rank-heavy, the NATO command has been a grave disappointment, with even

our smallest Allies taking their daily cues (and numerous caveats) from their capitals. Although NATO voluntarily took over the nationwide military mission in 2006, most of the continental powers—Germany, Italy, and Spain, for example—have refused to engage in combat under any circumstances. Our Allies—except the British, Canadians, Dutch, and a few others—have been a total disappointment. They not only fight ineffectively, but also their risk aversion has caused them on occasion to impede the operational effectiveness of other police and military forces.⁷ They are also not carrying their share of the development assistance burden. To say the least, Afghan officials are very disappointed with European military and financial support.

The United States and its coalition partners have done an inadequate job in developing the Afghan security forces.

The major mistake made by the coalition has been the failure to build Afghan capacity for governance, rule of law, and security. Even in the military and police areas, we have provided services more than we have

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enabled the Afghans to do for themselves. While our tactical units are at full complement, our advisory efforts are hampered by numerical and quality shortfalls. U.S. tactical units are well trained and cohesive, but our advisory elements are pickup teams, which often lack effective preparation for their complex duties. In all, the advisory effort is

Afghan cabinet minister, 80 percent of all aid flowing into Afghanistan totally bypasses the Kabul leadership.⁸ The government's capacity to act on its own has not developed, and in rare cases, such as the National Solidarity Project—which features the government, local citizens' councils, and NGOs working together—the people do not interact with the central government at all. Provincial and district governments are clearly underdeveloped. In all, while many important projects have been successfully executed, state capacity remains low, and the private sector suffers from a lack of security and weak national and provincial governance. The rule of law is erratic in many areas outside the major cities. The areas with the least security have received the least amount of aid.

What Is to Be Done?

Having assessed our failures, we should next refine our strategy. Our goal in Afghanistan—the ultimate metric of victory—should be a decent, legitimate, and representative country, at peace with itself and its neighbors, and able to handle its own internal and external threats. It should be a reliable enemy against al Qaeda and other extremist movements. The Afghan state should be a blend of central and local/tribal power in proportions that Afghans find acceptable. Again, bypassing the center to work directly with local authorities is a nonstarter.

The first mechanism to help to bring about such a state is a counterinsurgency strategy that works to clear, hold, and build. Job One is to protect the population, secure the nationwide elections, and strike devastating blows against the Afghan Taliban wherever they are. At the same time, there must be a state-building process that addresses governance, economic development, rule of law, and the repair or replacement of basic infrastructure. In all things, the development of Afghan capacity must be given the highest priority, even at the expense of efficiency. At the same time, U.S. officials need to hold the Afghan government accountable and push it to eliminate corruption.

All efforts in Afghanistan must be mirrored in our policy toward Pakistan. Islamabad, too, needs aid. At the same time, Pakistan must end its links to the Taliban and begin to combat the Afghan Taliban resident on its soil, as it has begun to fight the Pakistani Taliban that threatens its emerging



Providing jobs for Afghan workers and promoting economic progress are critical to achieving lasting success in Afghanistan

While the ANA has come a long way and has reached its original target strength, it is light on logistics, communications, and transportation. The ANP is clearly inadequate in numbers and professionalism. Complicating the security situation is the fact that Afghanistan has become the number one opium-producing nation in the world. Efforts to control narcotics—a major source of government corruption and Taliban financing—have been ineffective to date.

essential to success in Afghanistan, but it is a distant second priority behind the provision of tactical units. As the ANA and ANP are expanded, our shortfalls in the quantity and quality of advisors will become even more critical.

In economic areas, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations have found it necessary (or convenient) to go around the weak Afghan government, and today, according to an

democracy. Pakistan's leaders should help us fight "our" Taliban, and we should help them fight theirs.

Since much of Pakistan's attitude toward Afghanistan reflects its threat perceptions concerning India, it is incumbent on the United States to work to lower Indo-Pakistani tensions. Confidence can be built through discussions, and through both sides showing more transparency vis-à-vis their policies in and toward Afghanistan. Ironically, India does not want to engage in such talks. In a similar vein, a strategic dialogue with Iran could be a vehicle for reminding Iranians how much they hated the original Taliban and why they need to cooperate once again with the government of Afghanistan against a common enemy. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has invited Iran to dialogue on Afghanistan, and Tehran would benefit greatly.

On the security front inside Afghanistan, major changes must be made. First, there needs to be a major reinforcement of coalition forces and growth in the ANA. Second, we should concentrate on giving the army the enablers—fire support, helicopters, and logistics—that it needs to become more independent and expeditionary. The ANA should also be charged to arm and supervise local tribal guardsmen, who can serve as force multipliers. Over time, *advising and mentoring* the ANA—not *fighting*—should become the most important task of coalition forces.

Third, to streamline the chain of command, the clock should be turned back. While the ISAF commander remains in overall command, NATO ISAF should directly control the areas in the north and west, where peace-keeping and stability operations are the rule. An Autonomous Combat Command (ACC), a coalition of the willing with a separate war-fighting headquarters, would conduct counterinsurgency and stability operations in the east and south. NATO and ACC units would be responsible for mentoring local ANA units in their respective areas of responsibility. A separate training and advisory command—again, a coalition of the willing—would support advisory efforts in both areas of responsibility and would manage security assistance to the ANA and ANP.⁹

Fourth, good counternarcotics operations will make for good counterinsurgency effects. Coalition military units should begin to gather intelligence in order to target drug lords, warehouses, and laboratories. The

coalition should leave retail "poppy whacking" to the counternarcotics police.

Fifth, the government, coalition, and international community, including NGOs and major businesses, should establish a national coordination center in Kabul to plan and manage counterinsurgency, aid, and state-building activities. This center would have an operational level for planning and execution on various lines of operations, as well as a senior executive level that would meet monthly. Afghan government representatives should chair each of the multiple forums. Iran, Pakistan, and other regional states could maintain liaison officers at both levels. This center would bring all relevant actors to the table on security, governance, and economic development.

Finally, long-range planners in the coordination center should begin transition planning. In each line of operation, they should define an endstate and a work plan to put Afghans in charge of their own country. One area ripe for participation is the Provincial Reconstruction Teams, which should ultimately become Afghan-led and coalition-supported.

We are not doing well in Afghanistan, but we could be back on a path to victory by the end of 2010. For our own security, we should stick to our commitments and pick up the pace of our efforts, fighting harder against the Taliban and working harder to help build a legitimate Afghan state. In the end, the most essential thing the coalition can do is to develop Afghanistan's capacity to secure its

own country and to run its own affairs. We can help, but in the end, only Afghans can achieve victory. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ ABC News/BBC/ARD Poll, "Afghanistan: Where Things Stand," December 2008, available at <<http://abcnews.go.com/PollingUnit/story?id=6787686&page=1>>.

² See discussion in Russell Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 5.

³ Henry A. Kissinger, "A Strategy for Afghanistan," *The Washington Post*, February 26, 2009, A19.

⁴ Unpublished testimony of Marin Strmecki before the Senate Armed Services Committee, February 26, 2009.

⁵ Joseph J. Collins, "To Further Afghan Reconciliation: Fight Harder," *Small Wars Journal*, October 31, 2008, available at <<http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2008/10/to-further-afghan-reconciliation/>>.

⁶ Robert M. Gates, "A Balanced Strategy: Reprogramming the Pentagon for a New Age," *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 1 (January-February 2009), 28.

⁷ Author's private discussions with three senior Afghan national security officials, one in 2008 and two others in 2009, in Washington, DC.

⁸ Presentation by a senior Afghan official in Washington, DC, in the winter of 2009.

⁹ A fuller treatment on how to revise command and control in Afghanistan can be found in the unpublished testimony of Lieutenant General David Barno, USA (Ret.), before the Senate Armed Services Committee, February 26, 2009.

Navy engineer surveys elevation of dirt added to landing strip expansion project, Helmand Province



U.S. Navy (Patrick W. Mullen III)